

Therapy

Acupuncture in physiotherapy

Acupuncture is a form of therapy where physiotherapists insert fine needles into specific points in the body to produce a therapeutic effect.

Evidence has shown acupuncture is useful for treating pain in a variety of conditions. However, it does not work for everybody or every condition.

Physiotherapists use acupuncture in addition to other treatments. The aim of acupuncture is to reduce pain levels so that other interventions, such as exercises, can be progressed more effectively.

How acupuncture works

Acupuncture causes the release of hormones and chemicals which send signals to your brain and spinal cord. These signals help to “block” some of the pain messages that your brain is receiving and reducing the sensitivity of tender points in the body. This reduction in pain can result in improved movement and function in the affected joint.

Acupuncture can also be used to relieve tenderness in specific areas of tight or tender muscles.

During treatment

Your physiotherapist will discuss the potential benefits of acupuncture with you, in addition to the potential risks, side effects and other treatment options. You will be asked to complete and sign a written consent form before the treatment.



Patient Information

You will be asked to lie or sit comfortably on a treatment bed. Acupuncture points will be selected that are suitable for your condition; this may not always be at the site of your pain.

Single use, sterile, disposable needles are used and will be left in place for between 10 and 30 minutes. The physiotherapist may 'stimulate' the needles throughout the treatment; this involves rotating the needles gently. The aim of this is to maintain the dull, heavy sensation, which has been found to increase the pain-relieving effects of acupuncture. Sometimes, small electrical impulses are used to stimulate the needles. This is called electro-acupuncture.

A brief sharp sensation is usually felt as the needle penetrates the skin. This is then sometimes followed by a mild, heavy, dull ache. The sensation is unique to each individual.

The treatments will vary based on the individual and the condition being treated. Commonly, between 2 and 10 needles will be used.

After the treatment, most people can continue their day as usual. If you feel tired or drowsy, it is recommended that you do not drive or operate machinery.

How many treatments are needed

The pain-relieving effects of acupuncture build up as the treatment progresses. Usually, a positive effect can be experienced within 3 to 4 sessions. If there is no improvement by this point, your physiotherapist might stop the acupuncture treatment. If you're showing improvement, the treatment may continue for up to 6 sessions.

Is acupuncture safe

Acupuncture is generally very safe treatment. Single-use, sterile, disposable needles are used in this department and all physiotherapists who use acupuncture have had additional, specific training which they are required to update regularly.

Patient Information

Adverse effects

The following are the known (based on research evidence) possible adverse effects associated with acupuncture. Your physiotherapist will discuss these with you and explain if you are at an increased risk:

- Bleeding and Bruising - 3 in 100
- Mild aggravation of symptoms – 3 in 100, of which between 70 and 85% of show improvement
- Mild pain at the needle site - 1 in 100
- Drowsiness - 1 in 100
- Dizziness - 6 in 1,000
- Pain not at needle site - 1 in 200
- Nausea - 3 in 1,000
- Feeling faint - 3 in 1,000
- Stuck or bent needle - 1 in 1,000
- Headache - 1 in 1,000
- Allergy or infection - up to 1 in 500
- Pneumothorax (collapsed lung) - less than 2 in 1 million

Contact your physiotherapist or GP if you experience any side effects or have any concerns.

Acupuncture is not appropriate for you:

- if you have an unstable heart condition
- if you have poorly controlled epilepsy or undiagnosed seizures
- if you have poorly controlled diabetes
- if you have a severe stainless steel or nickel allergy
- if you have a severe phobia of needles
- if you have an infection, poor skin condition or swelling in the area to be needled
- if you are pregnant or trying to conceive (your acupuncture will need to be performed by someone with specialist training if this option is available)

Patient Information

- if you have uncontrolled movements in the area to be treated
- if you have confusion that would limit your understanding of the procedure or ability to give informed consent

Please discuss with your physiotherapist before treatment:

- if you have a stable (well controlled) heart condition or damage to heart valves (heart valve defects / valvular heart disease)
- if you have well controlled epilepsy
- if you have a pacemaker or any other electrical implant
- if you have a bleeding disorder e.g. haemophilia or are taking anti-coagulants (blood thinning medication)
- if you have a weakened immune system or are undergoing treatment for cancer
- if you have well controlled diabetes
- if you have had lymph nodes removed in the past
- if you have had previous side effects to acupuncture treatment

Other treatment options

Other alternatives to acupuncture are available and should be discussed with your physiotherapist before the treatment. These will be unique to the individual, but may include:

- Taking pain killers such as paracetamol
- Other physiotherapy input such exercise-based rehabilitation
- Steroid injection (only appropriate for specific conditions)

How should I prepare for my acupuncture treatment?

Read this information leaflet carefully. Ask any questions or highlight any concerns you have with your physiotherapist.

Patient Information

Bring suitable clothing to your treatment, including shorts if your problem is in your leg or back. If you have long hair, make sure you have some way of putting it up.

Make sure you have something to eat within at least 2 hours before your appointment time, as there is increased risk of fainting or drowsiness if you have acupuncture on an empty stomach.

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